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THE ARMS AND GREAT SEAL

OF THE

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS



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THE HISTORY
OF THE

SEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH

It is difficult to say when seals were first used. We know that it must have been very long ago, for they are mentioned in the Bible.

The use of seals by individuals was more widespread in ancient times than nowadays, for then, most men, even those of high rank and great wealth, could not write. To signify acceptance of a document or a writing, they would impress an attached blob of soft wax with their coat-of-arms which was usually cut into their signet ring. Men, because they could not read, were loath to affix their seal and thus pledge themselves to perform an act unless they were sure of the contents of the paper they had sealed.

From this gradually evolved the idea that documents of state as well as very important personal papers such as deeds should have a seal to bear witness as to their authenticity.

The charter granted by Charles I in 1629 authorized the Massachusetts Bay Colony to use a seal, and the impression of an Indian at the left was the one adopted. It was used until the charter was annulled.

In the pre-Revolutionary era, the royal coat-of-arms of England with a suitable motto was the seal of the Province of Massachusetts.

Governor Edmund Andros during his brief and arbitrary rule (1686-1689) used a seal with two sides as shown below.



The royal governors affixed their personal seals to commissions issued to officers in the military service.

When the conflict began in 1775, between the province and England, General Thomas Gage, the royal governor, had the custody of the province seal. As his authority was no longer recognized by the province it became necessary to establish a new public seal.

Therefore, on July 28, 1775, the General Court passed an order appointing a committee to consider "what is necessary to be done relative to a Colony Seal." The design adopted was that of the English-American in the following representation.

A motto was also chosen: "Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem" which, down through the years, since the day of its adoption, has remained the motto of the Commonwealth. Freely translated this means, "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." It was written about 1659, and is attributed to the famous English patriot, Algernon Sydney.



Soon after the first meeting of the state legislature under the Constitution, on December 13, 1780, the council accepted Nathan Cushing's design for a new seal for the Commonwealth. This action of the council was the only authority for the seal until 1885, when the legislature by act prescribed its present form.

The arms of the commonwealth shall consist of a shield having a blue field or surface with an Indian thereon, dressed in a shirt and moccasins, holding in his right hand a bow, and in his left hand an arrow, point downward, all of gold; and, in the upper corner of the field; above his right arm, a silver star with five points. The crest shall be a wreath of blue and gold, whereon, in gold, shall be a right arm, bent at the elbow, clothed and ruffled, with the hand grasping a broadsword. The motto shall be "Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem."



The coat-of-arms as drawn and emblazoned under the direction of the state secretary in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-eight and deposited in his office shall be the official representation of the arms of the commonwealth of Massachusetts, and all designs of said coat-of-arms for official use shall conform strictly to said representation.

The great seal of the commonwealth shall be circular in form, bearing upon its face a representation of the arms of the commonwealth encircled with the inscription, "Sigillum Reipublicae Massachusettensis." The colors of the arms shall not be an essential part of said seal, and an impression from a seal engraved according to said design, on any commission, paper or document shall be valid without such colors or the representation thereof by heraldic lines or marks.

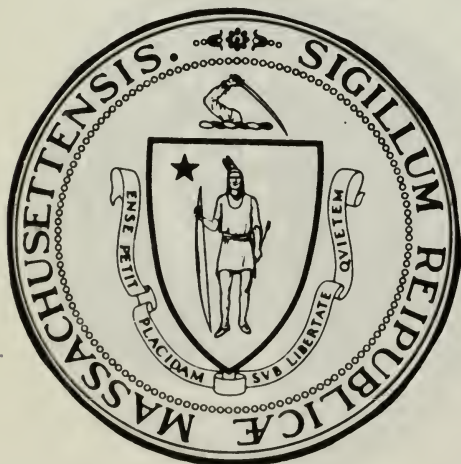
In 1898, the design drawn by Edmund H. Garrett under the direction of the then Secretary of the Commonwealth was made the official representation of the coat-of-arms of the state.

The Great Seal is in the custody of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, who is required by the Constitution to affix an impression of it to all commissions issued in the name of the Commonwealth. In addition to commissions all records certified by the Secretary must bear the Great Seal.

The seal of the commonwealth now in use in the office of the state secretary shall be the authorized seal so long as its use may be continued.

The use of the arms or the Great Seal of the commonwealth for any advertising or commercial purpose is prohibited by law.

THE GREAT SEAL
IN USE TODAY



Michael J. Conolly

SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH